

LBJ Adds Some Facts, Omits Others

By Chalmers M. Roberts

Additions and omissions mark former President Johnson's account of the 1964-65 escalation of the Vietnam war, it is evident from the excerpts from his book published today.

Probably the single most disputed issue in Mr. Johnson's conduct of the war was the alleged Aug. 4, 1964, attack in the Tonkin Gulf by North Vietnamese boats on two American destroyers, the Maddox and Turner Joy. Mr. Johnson declared then, and reaffirms in his book, that the evidence of the attack was conclusive. As a result he sought and got the Tonkin Gulf Resolution from Congress.

But his critics contend the attack either never took place or even if something did occur Mr. Johnson blew it up out of all proportion because he already was determined to strike North Vietnam from the air. At least three books have now been written about the affair and the thrust of each has been on the critical side.

American intercepts of North Vietnamese messages were heavily relied upon at the time to prove that the attack took place. Their texts, however, have never been made public though Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara in 1968 did summarize them for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and show the texts to the senators in private. Now the former President quotes from two of the messages and concludes that "clearly

the North Vietnamese knew they were attacking us."

The quotes will not satisfy the doubters. Why did not Mr. Johnson reveal the complete texts, they will ask? And why not, indeed. Cryptographic protection is the usual answer but it is not convincing, given the nature of current procedures at the time. Mr. Johnson thus would seem only to have reopened the argument.

In this installment of his memoirs the former President discusses four of the first five major Vietnam decisions. The Tonkin retaliation was one of them; the Johns Hopkins speech another; the policy of reprisal by air another. The fifth "and by far the hardest" was sending ground troops to Vietnam to join the battle.

As the former President describes all these decisions, each was reached with great soul searching. Yet, read as a whole in hindsight, there was an inevitable progression from one to the other, especially from Rolling Thunder, the air campaign against the North, to the shipment of massive numbers of troops to the South.

As he so often did while in office, Mr. Johnson saw his actions as steps logically following the policies of his two predecessors, Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy. Omitted from today's excerpts are descriptions of Gen. Eisenhower's personal encouragement to Mr. Johnson.)

The air war simply was not enough; only ground forces could save South Vietnam. In March, 1965,

Gen. William Westmoreland's request for the first two Marine battalions was granted. Then on April 1 came the big decision to beef up the manpower though the Army forces still were described as "logistic and support." It would be only a matter of time, however, until combat forces would have to go as such.

Mr. Johnson's account of the April 1 decision lists three steps as "among the specific military actions I approved." But the Pentagon papers made public something the former President totally skips: his instructions to avoid telling the American public about the major steps he was taking. This was contained in the National Security Action Memorandum 328, over the signature of McGeorge Bundy, to the Secretaries of

State and Defense and the head of the CIA detailing Mr. Johnson's "decisions."

It was this memorandum which contained the statement that "the President desires" that "premature publicity be avoided by all possible precautions" on the key new military steps. "The President's desire," the memo concluded, "is that these movements and changes should be understood as being gradual and wholly consistent with existing policy."

If this decision then was to be painted as "wholly consistent with existing policy" how can it now be "by far the hardest" of five decisions Mr. Johnson had then taken about the war? Herein lies part of the credibility gap that plagued him in office and which today's installment fails to dispel.